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## UNMAS's Rapid-response Exercise

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# UNMAS Rapid-response Exercise

In a post-conflict country littered with mines and explosive remnants of war, the capability to deploy highly qualified mine-action staff rapidly is key to saving lives. United Nations Mine Action Service recently spearheaded a new 10-day emergency training program based on lessons learned from previous rapid-response efforts in Kosovo, Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This exercise emphasized the importance of interagency coordination and was designed to simulate a scenario in which these relationships would be called upon heavily in order to achieve success.

by Liban Holm [ United Nations Mine Action Service ] and  
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For the sixth consecutive year, UNMAS, in coordination with the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB)—formerly known as the Swedish Rescue Services Agency—conducted a mine-action rapid-response training program exercise. In 2009, the exercise took place at the MSB College for Risk- and Safety-Management in Sandö, Sweden, from 8–17 June.

The exercise was conducted within the *Framework for Mine Action Planning and Rapid Response*, whereby UNMAS deploys a mine-action coordination team with MSB support to establish a mine-action coordination center. The program was conducted in the fictional country of Sandland where a conflict had recently ended after a U.N./NATO intervention. The exercise involved assembling the Sandland Mine Action Coordination Center. The principal task of the S-MACC was to produce a landmine/ERW threat assessment and propose methodology for reduction of that threat. In addition, the S-MACC directed the conduct of real explosive-ordnance-disposal teams simulating the management of the emergency response. The exercise was conducted under field conditions with the participants living in a tent camp set up by the MSB support staff.

The *Framework for Mine Action Planning and Rapid Response* was successfully implemented in Lebanon after the conflict with Israel in 2006. An operational mine-action

center was already in place but not equipped to handle the enormous increase in workload. The Framework allows additional staff to be deployed rapidly in support of an existing mine-action center. The need for help in Lebanon was grave—approximately an hour after the cease-fire was called and Israeli troops pulled back, people began to return to their homes, and the first calls came in about victims of unexploded ordnance, including cluster munitions.

The aim of the exercise was to provide the U.N. with an opportunity to train selected staff in key positions and also for MSB to train their staff to work in support of mine-action rapid-response operations. The exercise also served to validate and improve the Rapid Response Plan Operational Manual, including standard working procedures. The 2009 session consolidated the improvements made to the exercise in recent years and widened the body of participating U.N. agencies and nongovernmental organizations. The intention of this broader inclusion reflects the complex interagency environment that will likely be present during an activation of the framework.

### Participants and the Exercise Control Staff

The 2009 control staff came from numerous organizations, including UNMAS, UNICEF, the U.S. Department of Defense's Humanitarian

Demining Training Center, DanChurchAid, Danish Demining Group and Mines Advisory Group. UNICEF, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and nongovernmental organizations nominated UNMAS and MSB staff from Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, Nepal,

and humanitarian mission, acting under chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, following the conflict in Sandland. Notional Sandland was located in Northern Europe and borders Nordland to the north and Southland to the south and west. In the scenario, Sandland was invaded by Nordland, but as a result of a NATO bombing campaign and subsequent ground war, Nordland troops were pushed back. The conflict gave rise to large numbers of internally displaced people. In neighboring Southland, large numbers of refugees had gathered in UNHCR campus. The air campaign involved the



The U.N. medical team hit two fictional landmines during an operation and had to be rescued and treated for injuries.

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Sudan and Western Sahara to participate in the drill. Additionally, the Swedish Rangers supported the effort by taking on the roles of NATO troops and militia. They provided mock small arms fire at night close to the camp area to simulate an immediate post-conflict setting with sporadic fighting. A directing organization was set up to ensure the S-MACC component was conducted and supported in accordance with the UNMAS/MSB Rapid Response Plan.

### Setting the Stage

The scenario for the exercise developed over several years and is inspired by similar real events and emergen-

cies that occurred in Kosovo and Lebanon. The detailed practice scenario included additional fictitious documents describing Sandland, such as the *CIA World Fact Book*, Sandland Concept of Operations, an outline of Sandland political profiles and Security Council resolutions. The exercise was based on a U.N. peacekeeping

use of unitary bombs and cluster-munitions systems. The use of cluster bombs caused international interest because many of the NATO nations had recently signed and pledged to support the Convention on Cluster Munitions. During the exercise, the simulated UNHCR-run IDP camps in Sandland were quickly overwhelmed, and after a couple of “practice days,” IDPs started to return home, resulting in large numbers of casualties primarily from unexploded cluster munitions and other unexploded ordnance. UNICEF provided information that schools were used as temporary shelters for militia groups and were targeted, causing explosive remnants of war to be left behind. The U.N. World Food Programme also reported accidents involving contracted drivers hitting UXO/mines while delivering food. To ensure greater coordination and exchange of information, interagency coordination meetings were established by UNHCR as the lead in the Protection Cluster,<sup>2</sup> in which mine action was located.

### Implementation and Results

This year, the participants, after having been through NATO and militia checkpoints, arrived from the airport and moved into a tent camp set up by MSB support staff. The participants had received briefings at the beginning of the exercise and background documents outlining the scenario. To initiate the exercise, the S-MACC received tasks that provided additional information and/or provided the participants with challenges such as overlapping EOD tasks that would have to be prioritized or high-level visitors. The tasks were divided into



subgroups targeting specific elements of the S-MACC, including operations, mine-risk education, media and nongovernmental organizations. In order to monitor the performance of the S-MACC's response to the tasks without undermining the operation, the control staff wore yellow vests, marking them as neutral observers.

The phrase "what you see is what you get" was key to understanding the scenario; it supported the illusion of reality in the drill and also set the boundaries. For example, if there was a shop down the road listed in the

tion on mine contamination. The participants were told, "There is no right or wrong," to emphasize that they were in a live role-play situation. If a specific task was solved only after a very long response time or not solved at all, it was repeated in a slightly different fashion. For instance, as part of the scenario, the S-MACC was visited several times by local militias that threatened them until NATO was requested to provide support and security for the camp area. Once the S-MACC solved the security issue, militias stopped trying to enter the camp.



The NATO troops, played by Swedish Rangers, secured the airport and set up a checkpoint where the team was examined for identification.

scenario, there was actually a shop down the road. If the scenario called for participants to drive along the road and not find evidence of UXO/mine contamination, they actually did not see signs of contamination. It took a couple of days to master this level of role-playing. All participants assumed the role they played, giving the exercise real value. The S-MACC could call a central U.N. switchboard and reach almost anyone they requested by the name of their character.

One goal for this year's exercise was to get the S-MACC staff out on the roads to conduct surveys and complete tasks. These tasks ranged from explosive-ordnance-disposal tasks on roads blocking WFP convoys to a meeting with a local militia commander with informa-

The S-MACC staff hit the ground running, trying to gather as much information as possible. However, at such an early stage of a complex post-conflict setting, not much information was available, and other U.N. agencies were only starting to establish a presence. The S-MACC staff worked 15–16 hours a day and soon started to show signs of fatigue. Normally the information and final presentation would have been completed in a month, but during the exercise, these tasks had to be compressed into eight days.

The participants "did fare very well adapting and overcoming the many challenges that came across their desks," said Angel Belen, Deputy Director at the U.S. Department of Defense's Defense Security Cooperation



Simulated militia groups opposed to the presence of the United Nations and NATO confront the mine-action team.

Agency.<sup>2</sup> Using their past experiences from different venues, the participants helped each other throughout the exercise.

A new element included in the 2009 drill was the addition of United Nations Television and Video, which was invited to the practice to document the training of the emergency response in Sandland. Documenting the exercise is important to underline the significance of being able to deliver a rapid response and to highlight the importance of interagency coordination. Additionally, donors from the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, who are funding not only the exercise directly but also provide generous funding to UNMAS mine-action programs, will get an opportunity to have a closer look into some of the opportunities their funding provides.

#### Conclusion

The feedback from participants and exercise-control staff was very

positive for the 2009 drill. The participants in the S-MACC fulfilled the overall goal of presenting a plan for immediate-, medium- and long-term intervention.

The exercise is a valuable tool in terms of lessons learned in a controlled training environment.<sup>3</sup> The practice also provided two-way learning, as it gave a unique opportunity for NGO personnel to see firsthand the complexity of problems and political issues that a UN-MACC invariably must deal with in an immediate post-conflict situation, and vice versa. The same is true for the U.N. agencies represented, and all parties agree that this sharing of knowledge and understanding, as well as the contacts made, serves to significantly improve an integrated mine-action response immediately after conflict—the very time when lives are most endangered and the humanitarian relief effort is at its most vulnerable.

"This exercise is the way forward for the mine-action community; developing best practices, standards and measures of effectiveness," said Belen.<sup>4</sup> ♦

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